

Indigenizing Evaluation Research: A Long-Awaited Paradigm Shift

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Abstract

Developed in partnership with two 'aina-based (*life-sustaining, land-based*) programs on the island of O'ahu, Hawai'i, the strengths-enhancing evaluation research (SEER) model establishes base-line assumptions from which evaluation processes and products may be customized to report indigenous and culturally-based program strengths, effectiveness, and to discover formative needs. SEER is a research philosophy and practice that honors and respects indigenous, culturally based practices and ways of knowing. When engaged in a sincere, respectful manner, SEER partnerships may set in motion long-lasting, community-researcher relationships that can influence the reciprocal wellbeing of people and 'aina. This article describes the authors' behaviors and practices that allowed for guesthood and partnership with indigenous, culturally based programs, and led to the recognition of guiding principles in evaluation research.

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BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Indigenous, culturally based, non-profit programs devote their limited resources to the delivery of services to under-served, low-income and special needs populations. Theirs is a constant battle to continue operating while persistently seeking financial support through either grant proposals, contributions, income development or other means. An equally critical need of these programs is dedicated infrastructure for program development and evaluation, without which best practices of these innovative community programs remain obscure and unsubstantiated.

Presently, indigenous programs are becoming more successful at receiving federal funding. Program leadership is knowledgeable about the Government Performance Results Act (1993), for example, which requires nationally funded programs to establish



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performance goals that "... define the level of performance to be achieved" and "... express such goals in an objective, quantifiable and measurable form". To meet these requirements, federal grants awarded to community programs include budgeting for independent program evaluators. In turn, evaluators must provide evidence of substantial training and experience in western scientific research methodology to be eligible for these contracts. Under these regulations programs carefully conceived using a western framework of outcome measurement have a greater likelihood of receiving favorable enough evaluations to continue funding.

The message is obvious: Learn to conceptualize and operationalize indigenous practices within the context of western scientific measurement and chances for perceived legitimacy and financial support are increased. Community-based, indigenous programs seeking federal funding, therefore, rapidly learned to adapt and acquire necessary skills to develop acceptable outcome monitoring and reporting. For these programs conforming to US government standards, albeit time-consuming, is not the primary issue. Their concern is with evaluation methods that do not adequately describe or make the case for indigenous programs' strengths, and as a result, do not justly evaluate outcomes. The frustration lies with standard evaluation findings that: 1) are limited by quantitatively focused results, 2) present a narrow view of the program's dynamics, the importance of relational processes and the context and meaning of culture-based practices; and 3) overlook the holistic connections between people, values-based practices and life-sustaining earth ('aina) which impact long-term outcomes, enduring value and sustaining well-being within communities.

Strengths enhancing evaluation research (SEER), was developed for use by both community-based program personnel (insiders) and researchers (guest/outside). The practices suggested in *A Handbook for Strengths-Enhancing Evaluation Research* and accompanying DVD, (Mataira and Morelli, 2010) acknowledge and honor indigenous ways of knowing and the integrity of cultural practices. SEER envisions evaluation research as providing pathways to strengthening communities, and collaborative research. The model offers internal program providers and external guest researchers recommendations for engagement, data collection, analysis and report of findings; the methods are described in the SEER handbook. The following article describes the core elements of SEER that developed in the course of forming partnerships with two indigenous community-based programs.

EVALUATION RESEARCH PURPOSES, TYPES, ELEMENTS

Program evaluation is defined as a systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and outcomes of programs to make judgments or necessary decisions about the program, improve program effectiveness and/or inform decisions about future programming (Patton, 2002; McNamara, 2008).

The evaluation purpose should guide decisions regarding design, measurement, analysis, and reporting. The purpose of evaluation may be *summative* (determining program effectiveness), *formative* (program development and improvement), *action oriented* (focused on solving a specific problem), or a *developmental evaluation* (geared to altering interventions as needed) (Patton, 2009). Program evaluation may be *goals-based*, attempting to discover the extent to which programs are meeting predetermined goals and objectives; *process-based*, focused on understanding how a program produces its results; or *outcomes-based*, asking whether the program is effective improving the targeted problem area (McNamara, 2008). Evaluation may include a *needs assessment* for the purposes of targeting and identifying problems, or determining service gaps or planning for future needs (Grinnell et al., 2010). Another important evaluation focus is the *efficiency evaluation* to determine the cost-effectiveness and cost-benefit of programs.

Action oriented evaluation may be an effective tool in establishing both the community's and program's political legitimacy. Michel Foucault informs us that "knowledge is power" and power is knowledge. It is necessary to remember indigenous and culture-based communities endeavor to engage in pursuits that, primarily, legitimate and protect their collective interests. Political legitimacy can be divided into two areas: fiscal accountability and social responsibility. Fiscal accountability involves resource allocation that is required to run an effective, transparent evidence oriented program. Social responsibility is the building and strengthening of the program's social capital. For community-based and 'aina-based programs, social capital lies inherently in its leadership; its network of relationships with existing and potential stakeholders, and its ability to produce quality outcomes.

Developmental evaluation as described by Patton (2009) is coincidentally akin to the way SEER was developed. Like developmental evaluators, we partnered with innovative 'aina-based programs and engaged in learning undefined processes by doing it and then evaluating. It is a *Ready, Fire, Aim* process rather than *Ready, Aim, Fire*, allowing for "changing the intervention, adapting it to changed circumstances, and altering tactics based on emergent conditions" (Patton, 2009). Similar to the developmental evaluation process Patton described, SEER is "relationship-oriented" and uses metaphors and narratives to enhance evaluation.

EVOLUTION OF SEER RESEARCHERS' EXPERIENCES AS GUESTS

When we accepted the funder's assignment to develop an evaluation tool that would measure the effectiveness of indigenous culturally based programs, the implied expectation was the end product would be akin to existing evaluation tools.

We, on the other hand, expected the research process itself would yield findings that would constitute the “tool” and believed the endeavor was an open door to exploration, adventure and creative innovation.

Based on our previous experiences conducting research within indigenous communities, we knew community-based participatory practices to be better suited to engaging indigenous programs than typical or standard evaluation processes. While we developed and received necessary approval from the university human subjects committee for confidentiality protocols and data collection interview schedules, our de facto data collection process, purposefully, followed and trusted what emerged through open-ended listening to the program leadership and staff. This created uncertainty about the path ahead; however, we were convinced and committed to learning from our hosts how the evaluation could be customized to their specific program needs.

Over the course of year-long immersion with ‘aina-based program staff, our data collection meetings were transformed into reciprocal learning sessions allowing us to experience each other’s perspectives, world views and emotional connections to people, places and family history. These storytelling sessions opened the doors to remembering and recapturing valuable teachings gifted to us throughout our lives; stories and lessons from grandparents, parents, connections that we recaptured.

In seemingly timeless conversations, we shared stories that helped each of us gain answers to unspoken questions: Who are you? Where are you from? Who is your family? What is important to you? What is your connection to this ‘aina? Why are you here? In these exchanges, the layers of formality began to disappear; we sought common ground and became real to each other. Our stories validated and affirmed; we taught each other and learned from each other.

Talking story or sharing narratives enabled us to discuss a wide spectrum of topics: Ancestry, cultural background, where and how we grew up, life experiences, small talk, interests, food, movies, songs, plants, people, friends, places, travels, parents, etc. Each meeting was videotaped for data collection. As part of our protocol of thanks and honoring, we always came with a small sharing of food.

DEVELOPING EVIDENCE-BASED, BEST-PRACTICES

While establishing our relationship with our hosts, we learned that these indigenous and culturally based program developers are well aware that delivery of effective, culturally resonant, best-practices requires a commitment to program monitoring and consistent data collection. They know that longitudinal evidence gathering and careful data analysis can establish culturally based best practices and identify areas in need of improvement. However, they are frustrated by the ongoing challenge of attempting to fit values-based programming into narrow conceptualizations of success and seeing program strengths go unrecognized or rendered meaningless within the context of abstract measures.

In recognizing each program's uniqueness, it was necessary to customize our data collection processes to be mutually designed and aligned with organizational functioning, programming direction and strength areas. Talking circles, individual talk-story interviews, observation and focus groups were among the ways we listened and learned. As part of our local and indigenous cultural protocols of respect and hospitality, we always shared food (symbolic nurturing and connection) as part of the story sharing (data collection) session.

A flexible approach to time permitted us to gain in-depth understanding into the program's daily functioning, the essential work of staff and leadership, individuals they serve, the working atmosphere and morale, and many other aspects of their collective work that could only be captured by interacting with them. Our informal interactions fostered a mutual comfort and trust level that evolved into open discussions about ideas to design and develop conceptual frameworks and methods that would best evaluate their programs.

CORE ELEMENTS OF SEER

DEVELOPING RESEARCHER GUESTHOOD WITH INDIGENOUS PROGRAMS

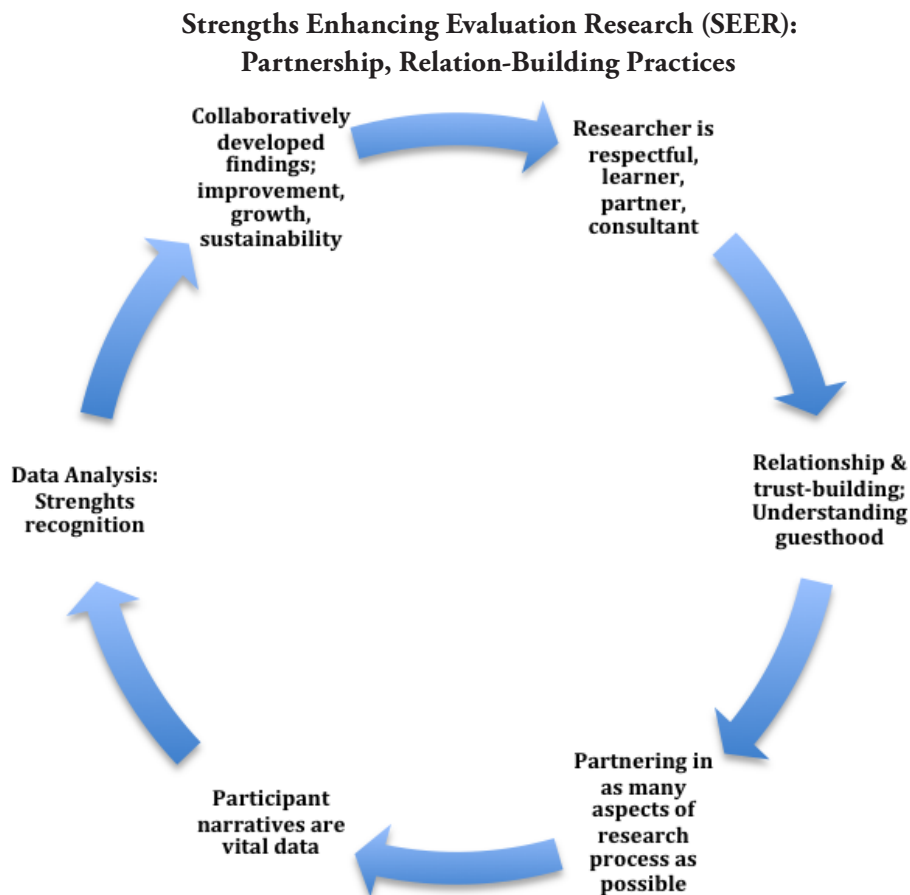
In standard evaluation research, the evaluator is contracted to provide objective assessment of outcomes directly related to programmatic goals and objectives. The process usually involves developing a logic model connecting each program objective to outputs and measurable outcomes. Generally, the evaluator administers pre-determined standardized measures to all key informants at relevant points in time. Throughout the process, the evaluator's intent is to keep a safe distance from program personnel and operations in order to maintain objectivity. While this de-contextualizing approach is important in assessing specific phenomena, in the case of values and culturally based interventions, context is critical to understanding the program's objectives in relation to sought after outcomes.

INDIGENIZING EVALUATION METHODS

Within indigenous settings, cultural protocols of engagement are all-important in order to establish relationships. In this study, we began the engagement process by expressing the desire to become a guest. Guesthood (Harvey, 2003) assumes respect and appreciation for the inherent intelligence and commitment of indigenous practitioners to their work. The evaluator's attitude and actions change to accommodate the research participant. We were unconcerned with remaining detached or objective, rather focused on developing relationships, understanding, observing and documenting how their processes result in desired outcomes.

We believe that the actions and behaviors of researchers in communities can have long-lasting impact on communities and multiple levels of individual and systemic well-being. Smith (1999) and other indigenous researchers remind us that research practices within indigenous communities need to be: Culturally safe, i.e. allowing the participant to tell his/her story without fear of judgment; involve the mentorship of elders within the culture; begin with the indigenous worldview; address the prevailing ideologies of cultural superiority within social, economic and political institutions; provide space for non-indigenous researchers who have a genuine desire to support the cause of indigenous peoples; open to alternative conceptions of the world; and begin with the intention to make a positive difference for the researched. Figure 1 presents SEER partnership and relation-building processes as they theoretically develop over time.

FIGURE 1 SEER: PARTNERSHIP, RELATION-BUILDING PRACTICES



PRINCIPLES OF ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING RESEARCH RELATIONSHIPS

Building on the identified indigenous research practices, and because of our relationship building with indigenous programs, SEER humbly offers the following principles as critical to establishing relationships within indigenous organizations:

- Behaving in a respectful manner at all times and in all situations,
- Honoring and listening to multiple perspectives and stories,
- Letting go of the role of expert, being comfortable in the learner role,
- Being open to recognizing one's own assumptions,
- Trusting the process, not needing to control it,
- Recognition and sensitivity to others' feelings as well as your own,
- Working in unison with another researcher to self-monitor and receive feedback,
- Modeling and demonstrating the collaborative, problem-solving partnership,
- Being prepared to take criticism, without defensiveness,
- Taking the time necessary to learn about and appreciate the differences between mainstream or researchers' cultures and the culture of research participants including within group differences,
- Recognizing cultural meanings regarding time, space, and relationships,
- Being respectful of perspectives, values and beliefs that may be different than the mainstream or the researchers',
- Not requiring participants to do anything the researchers would not be willing to do themselves,
- Being willing and open to sharing your story and connection to land, ancestry and culture,
- Willingness to commit to establishing long-term relationships by providing assistance or support as needed.

Of equal importance in this process is awareness that communication styles differ from culture to culture and person to person. Protocols for welcoming and beginning relations with "newcomers" are well known to indigenous, ethnic and culturally based peoples (Chun, 2006). These practices set the tone for continuing relations, provide protection for both guest and host by allowing both parties to experience each other under optimal conditions. However, even when guesthood is off to a good start, continuing and maintaining relationships requires careful nurturing.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS: KO KOA UKA, KO KOA KAI (PUKUI, 1983)

Ko koa uka, ko koa kai, *those of the upland, those of the shore* is a metaphor for the data collection process. It represents critical thinking and analytic mastery in order to bring together many ways of seeing; knowing and feeling for a collectively established purpose.

The use of metaphor in practice is common in many types of programs. Metaphor offers a culturally relevant set of symbols and terms that promote critical thinking and greater insight into systems and process. Metaphor stimulates parallel and corollary thought; thus promoting deep comprehension and intellectual integrity that serves to guide reasoning and behavior.

At the very least, metaphor-based practices serve to engage and retain clients which increase potential for successful intervention. Often programs are designed according to generic assumptions of behavioral change, which may not resonate with indigenous and culturally based families, thereby, discouraging them from seeking services.

Data collection sources may include existing documents, archival data, observations (dedicated observation, participant-observer, or observer-participant), focus groups, one-to-one interviews (structured, semi-structured, unstructured or general), phone interviews or general questionnaire.

Closely aligned with interview methods is the narrative or storytelling as a way of collecting data. The SEER process utilized the informal conversational interview or a storytelling format. Our evaluation model utilized a *community-based participatory and goal-free evaluation* framework (Scriven, 1972 in Patton, 2002).

Narrative as Method. Narrative or storytelling represents a universally accepted form of knowledge inquiry. In research, storytelling has significance as both practice and process; integrating cultural practice with the inquiry process. In direct practice, storytelling allows the process to integrate the telling and change goals for example as in motivational interviewing (Miller and Rollnick, 2002). Some of the advantages of storytelling as a method include:

Those being evaluated, “the researched”, are thereby, positioned as the experts whose knowledge customarily provided in the form of narratives is necessary to guide and modify the research design, collect reliable data, and complete a comprehensive, utilizable evaluation. Given that evaluation research is principally designed as systematic investigation of program “worth”, we make the case that storytelling as an indigenous practice incorporates and recognizes deeper layers worth.

SEER example. Talking-story with staff-members of both ‘aina-based programs enabled us to discuss deeply held beliefs not only about ancestry, cultural background, and life experiences, but equally important beliefs about life, values; how and why actions, people and land are connected to survival, the essence and meaning of life and ultimately sustainability. *These narratives became the basis of understanding how each program’s philosophies, methods and actions translated into their hoped-for outcomes.*

Videography to capture qualities and essences. SEER utilized a variety of data collection formats to best capture and present information, ideas and programmatic outcomes. These formats included maps, charts, models, graphs and video recordings of programs in action. The participants' comfort with these media allowed for flexible data collection and inclusive participation.

The multi-method approach created more opportunities for communication, promoted dialogue and discussion, and exchange of views between all participants. The interactions helped participants shape their stories and at the same time, aided the researchers in documenting the process, monitoring the program activities, and developing a visual teaching resource.

DATA ANALYSIS AND REPORTING METHODS

Data analysis. Determining the method or methods of data analysis connects back to the purpose of the study. The findings should answer the question/s posed at the beginning of the study and present information unique to qualitative inquiry. There are abundant ways of analyzing qualitative data depending on the theoretical tradition, approach and framework researchers utilize. These theoretical traditions include Ethnography, autoethnography, reality testing, constructionism/constructivism, phenomenology, heuristic inquiry, ethnomethodology, symbolic interaction, semiotics, hermeneutics, narratology/narrative analysis, ecological psychology, systems theory, chaos theory/non-linear dynamics, grounded theory, and orientational theories such as feminist theory, critical theory, and queer theory among others (Patton, 2002).

The open-ended nature of narratives provides data that are rich in detail, variable in content, neither systematic nor standardized. This makes analysis difficult, but not impossible. It's important to remember the critical reason for obtaining open-ended data is to understand perspectives of individuals without predetermining those perspectives through prior selection of question categories (Patton, 2002, p.20-21).

SEER example. Data analysis for the purpose of developing SEER protocols drew on several approaches, especially those which would *clarify how the values and philosophies of 'aina-based programs are transmitted in the activities and practices provided to program participants and then identifying outcome indicators*. Therefore, the data analysis process appears messy. Logistically, there were many pieces to keep track of and hours of videotaped interviews to review. Grounded theory and phenomenological data analysis methods were used to reveal human and non-human elements in program processes, emerging themes, program dynamics, characteristics of leadership and situational analysis maps (Charmaz, 2006; Patton, 2002).

The researchers questioned, deconstructed and re-constructed the data. After analysis of over seventy-five hours of recorded data, the initial findings were then taken back to the program participants for discussions, further analysis, modification

and additions. We aligned the SEER analysis process with indigenous philosophies by emphasizing the importance of concentric dualities, of balance, oracy, metaphor, and the value and wisdom that comes from merging oppositional knowledge sources. The process attempted to work with parallel worlds and paradoxical situations, while honoring both. Embracing paradox is a strengths perspective, essential to indigenous ways of living, allowing people to learn from and honor nature.

Validation of findings occurred through the “collective voice” of participants and researchers. We believed this process was critical to honoring indigenous peoples’ life ways and profound views of ‘meaning of place’. Ways of living guided more “from the inside out” are very different from modern day notions of living that are typically guided by external factors and influences. Thus, indigenous peoples’ relationships with the material world carries important implications for the researched and researcher.

The products developed (evaluation modalities) for the two ‘aina-based programs are radically different. To begin with, their purposes differ. The first program, we will refer to as “reciprocal well-being of land and people” (RW), and the second, as “child and family wellbeing” (CFW). When we started working with RW, the program was just beginning to document the stories of their participants in relation to the ‘aina restoration. CRW has had many outcomes-based evaluations performed over time. Their desire was to learn more about the characteristics of their organizational and performance functioning, that is, how well they are doing in providing services. Since the purpose of this study was development of tools or processes for evaluation research with or by ‘aina-based programs, this endeavor did not target program efficacy (summative evaluation).

FINDINGS

SEER examples. Initial analysis of data collected at the programmatic level indicates both ‘aina-based programs currently operate with intentional focus on developing fiscal and social legitimacy. As discussed previously, the targeted product for each ‘aina-based program differed in purpose. Therefore, the evaluation products differed. A more detailed description of the early development of evaluation tools for each program is available in the SEER handbook.

CFW – Program dynamics and process. For CFW, the evaluation product examines program process, organizational characteristics and how they facilitate or limit the program’s mission and goals. Their current focus is on keeping track of how to maintain relevant, effective, quality services. The indicators developed through participants’ narratives help to describe strengths and needs areas. The continuing challenge is developing language to describe the essence of ‘aina-based cultural processes and their impact on the participants. What is the essence of

how experiences on the ‘aina are manifested in a person’s life? How do ‘aina-based experiences translate into well-being? Answering these questions will be among the next steps in developing an evidence-base.

RW – Virtual ‘aina-based mapping. A land-use map involving participants’ stories as well as depicting features important to understanding the program and its objectives was the focus of RW’s evaluation tool development. The evaluation vehicle involves ‘aina-based mapping to document the experiences of program participants impacting the land over time. As part of this web-based documentation, significant stories of change shared by participants regarding their experiences on the ‘aina will be archived. Among the advantages of this method are converging quantitative and qualitative methods; presenting ongoing evaluative data in a broader contextual format; and the ability to update and verify continuously.

CONCLUSION

SEER is not a prescriptive model. Partnerships with ‘aina-based programs require a desire to understand cultural ways that permit guesthood. Guest researchers will learn a great deal by being respectful, humble, patient, and flexible; able to listen and observe with care; suspend judgment, and speak without pretense or imposition of expertise. This kind of involvement is a commitment, which moves beyond the self. The SEER approach may employ a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. SEER aims to improve single dimension evaluation by increasing data collection options to move beyond mixed or multi methods research design when working with indigenous programs.

The ‘aina-based programs we were privileged to work with expanded our ways of knowing and seeing. The “data gathering” sessions allowed us to experience each other’s perspectives, worldviews and emotional connections to people, places, family and history. The discussions opened doors to recapturing life-lessons gifted to us by grandparents, parents, extended family, friends and strangers; these stories carry connections that keep us in balance with the ‘aina and each other.

We are grateful to the individuals in both ‘aina-based programs who taught us more than we expected about the strengths that keep them connected to each other and the mission of their programs. We were humbled and honored to accept the gift of connection to these programs, the ‘aina, one another and reconnecting with the indigenous strengths in each of us. Each program’s unique methods of teaching sustainability through practices which emphasize values, respectful cultural processes, collective and individual strengths, developing leadership in all participants, modeling healthy communication and valuing relationships are essential practices for healthy communities, and as we learned, are equally significant in research practice.

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